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# **The Unscientific Approach to Science Fiction**

## **A Speech\* by Anne McCaffrey**

I believe that it's now incorporated in the publicity and legends which already surround this convention that men should never have given women the vote! Hindsight will now establish the following extrapolation: naturally, once women were given the vote, it must follow that one day a woman would be principal speaker at Philcon, formerly a male purview.

To mitigate my offense in being principal speaker, I should like to be able to give a very learned treatise. But I'm not a scientist and make no bones about that. I am, however, very much an expert in a certain area on which I can speak without fear of contradiction: Consequently, my subject today is the Unscientific Approach to Science Fiction.

Since I have acknowledged that I'm not a scientist, you may well ask, how can I have the gall, the unmitigated gall, to write science fiction.

In the first place, no one told me I couldn't. No one mentioned that the readership as well as the writership, is predominantly male... like about 96%. Thus, the corollary did not occur to me that I, being a woman, should not attempt to enter this field. Add to that ignorance the fact that I'm Irish and optimistic, present me with a challenge, however unstated and I'll figure out a way around it. There's a lot of Helva in me, you see. Or is it the other way round?

In the second place, it was extremely logical -- given my background, predilection and mental training -- for me to write science fiction. Old Hindsight shows that clearly. My mother, 't'was, who urged me to read *The Ship of Ishtar* by A. Merritt. I grooved with that one, and forthwith read everything I could find by Merritt. A year or so later, I was sent down from Girl Scout Camp as being incorrigibly obstreperous and spent the rest of the summer on the back porch, eating oranges, reading Edgar Rice Burroughs. I figured 2 dozen oranges a novel. And to this day, I cannot read ERB without smelling orange rind.

When I was fifteen -- again in summer -- I read Austin Tappen Wright's massive, fascinating *Islandia*. I've since owned about fourteen copies. Some of the Islandian philosophies turned me on and I'm always trying to infect special friends. In college, I wrote my honors thesis on Evgenie Zamiatin's *We*, comparing it to *Brave New World*, with a general comparison to other Utopic novels. Of course, I only vaguely realized then that *We* was 'science fiction.' No one told me.

In fact, I didn't realize how deeply affected I was by science fiction until 1950. I'd an acute case of bronchitis and the only reading

*\*Presented at the Philadelphia Science Fiction Conference on Sunday afternoon, November 16, 1969*

material in the apartment were some old copies of *Astounding* and *Fantastic*. One of the stories was *The Star Kings* by Edmond Hamilton, a story evoking that sense of wonder everyone admits is the mark of sf. I was hooked!

Fortunately, people told me I shouldn't read such lurid pulp crap so naturally, I read everything I could get my hands on... and didn't hide the covers with their sexy girls and ghastly monsters. (No one read the stories on the basis of the covers, however.) And when new wonders were slow in coming, I started writing some of my own. And they were wonders! Wheeoo. I didn't expect to succeed right away but I didn't give up writing.

I soon realized two things: I had no science background. Those same men who finally broke down and gave women the vote did not give them equal opportunities in other areas. When I was going to high school there was a subtle conditioning prevalent in guidance counseling for careers. Girls were not advised to go in for the sciences and were sometimes deliberately warned off. I got the bit, "You're so good in English, my dear, and there's so much more opportunity for a career there!" Or...why waste time and money where you're just going to marry and raise kids.

I got through high school and college with ninth grade general science (which they teach now in fourth grade) and cartography as science credits. I got my degree in Slavic language and literature. Great training for sf. However, while I realized that I had no science background, I knew a very important basic fact about advanced education: it teaches you how to find out what you don't know.

Therefore, my lack of formal training in the sciences is just that: a lack of formal training. There are a variety of methods one can use to cope with such a lack.

Read: I've plowed through most of Isaac's Guides to the Laymen... Guides about science, that is. Occasionally I am astonished at how much I have picked up in 20 years of reading sf. I can even tell when the author has had to leave out specific details, as he must keep to a general explanation. I consult several encyclopedias: *The Way Things Work*, *Dictionary of the Sciences*, the *Britannica* although that is often too erudite for me. And my children's textbooks. Kids are now taught a lot more in the earlier grades than they used to. I subscribe to the *Scientific American* although sometimes there, too, I feel that someone has shifted the language two points to the starboard and I'm left in port.

I remember particularly my utter confusion with the discussion of early computers. Until I found an analog, in terms I could understand. Before they discovered ample data storage techniques, information input was like a waiter in a very snazzy gourmet restaurant, who took your order and filed it in the kitchen, came back, offered you cocktails, fussed with appetizers and bread, until your entree was ready, which he served. The new solid state computers can handle a continuous input and print-out... like a waitress in a short-order restaurant, constantly taking new orders and dealing out the completed one.

I often pick up interesting snippets in doctor's offices and the *New York Times* but here I must be wary. My own ignorance trips me up. I don't know what they've omitted. Like that mess I made of the protein block in *A Womanly Talent*. But a reader, a surgeon in Chicago, was kind

enough to send me the process I should have described. And I am very grateful to him for his time and patience in writing me.

Method #1 is reading. Method #2 is getting tutored. The best way but expensive. Since I don't have even basic, if outdated, high school science, I'm not eligible for college extension courses. So, I got tutored in chemistry on a high school level. And here's an example of the law of compensation in action. If I'd studied chemistry in 1942-43, when I should have, think of all the misconceptions I'd've had to unlearn. They didn't know about sub-orbital shells in those days, much less theorized the existence of mesons or tachyons and all the far-out sub-particular theories. And that's barely 25 years ago. At any rate, the direct result of those tutorial sessions is patent in the Ship-Helva story "Dramatic Mission." Those Beta Corviki are pure energy and are expressed in terms of nuclear physics.

There are instances in which abysmal ignorance in an area can produce fresh, unusual applications of worn-out, well-known facts. I've posed myself a problem in manipulating the DNA patterns of a species. And I've never had any biology labs. So, I asked my son's tenth grade biology teacher, Anne Fullerton, if she'd give me half an hour of her time in her classroom. She did, being most patient and rather interested in the uses to which that half-hour would be put. She showed me the chromosome pattern of a fruit fly. And then set up a minnow under a dissecting microscope. It was fascinating for me to watch the heat of the viewing lamp melt a shard of ice in the fishy eye.

Method #3 is going about to scientific installations and gawking at sophisticated paraphernalia. We were down in Princeton last February and Son Todd and I elected to visit the Stellerator and Accelerator programs on campus. Neither were in operation and the Accelerator was actually in the process of being set up for a new course of experiments. We were able to get on the floor, peer through the massive lock to the racetrack itself. A chance like that is worth several millions of words ...even if I did lose a pair of stockings crawling around the Van de Graaff generator. There's a definable aura, part smell, partly the residue of excitements and disappointments, tensions, electricity, that you have to experience before you could write about it sensitively.

We were with a group of alumna and their wives. When the guide explained the heavy-water project, he could specifically state its ultimate goal...power from deuterium...a bucket of sea-water could supply the power of 300 gallons of gasoline...practical, comprehensible, goal.

In the Accelerator Program, however, that same group of tourists could not understand why similar billions were being spent on the research of sub-particular forces. Especially when the guide had to admit that the existence of  $k$  and  $\pi$  mesons was theoretical and there were no definite, concrete, visible, practical goals to be achieved.

One person gave him such a hard time that he finally looked at her most tolerantly and said, "Lady, the average American family has four members. This program costs 10¢ per person per year."

Todd muttered, in that inimitable loudspeaker whisper of his... "Jesus, doesn't she realize that you gotta know what you're messing with before you fool with it?" Stupid as I am scientifically, that fact had not escaped me either.

Recently I had a very flattering invitation from a pure research

group in California who would like me to tour their projects. Their letter was a masterpiece of diplomacy. They obviously know how unsophisticated I am scientifically and are sweetly determined to remedy this extraordinary condition. I shall take advantage of their generosity the next time I can wangle a trip to the West Coast. Such experts are invaluable to the science fiction writer.

I have a few local resources on whom I call, beside Miss Fullerton. Sometimes I know the situation I've got to resolve and have only to check the broad facts. Sometimes it's difficult for me to explain that I only need to know if this is theoretically possible. "Can the brap-sot famasol?" Good God, no! Anne, because if that geteral frapples, the teaser will widget." "Oh, but if I make the lateral extension mesh with the analogous material..." "No, then you framas." "All right. So what else is new?"

Merck's *Manual of Medicine* is another source, although I seldom come out of that book with a raving case of whatever it was I've decided to give someone. Mr. Stitzel of Dobkins' Pharmacy has been most understanding, he and I have figured out several things. His son has his doctorate in Pharmacy-pharmacopia, and reads sf so Mr. Stitzel doesn't think it odd that I do. He also keeps my books in stock.

So, there are four methods of tipping the shining scales of ignorance: reading, tutoring, visiting, expertizing. I'd prefer, had I my druthers, to acquire a solid, broad spectrum science background. But I'm forced by circumstances to use every shortcut I can contrive. It's miserably frustrating, for instance, to have to stop the flow of a story because, by God, I don't know when man learned how to extrude wire, much less how it's done. So I look it up... but it's interrupted my writing.

But that's how I overcome the lack of formal training. One doesn't have to let a handicap be one, you know. Therefore I believe myself able to write science fiction.

Fiction, yes. Webster calls fiction something invented by the imagination or feigned. Right? Or, an assumption of a possibility as a fact, irrespective of the question of its truth? Very much a definition of science fiction, which has a long history of telling people something can be done, often challenging them to do it. A history of rearranging preconceived notions to support a far-out theory... like atomic submarines (Thank you, Mr. Verne) or personal rocket belts (grâce à Flash Gordon) and moon flights (merci bien, M. Rostand). Science fiction is positive... the gauntlet of imagination flung in the face of dogma. Science fiction makes cuckolds of purists and skeptics.

I remember the old folksy joke about the farmer standing on the Hudson, watching a boat preparing to go -- of all directions -- UP river. He shakes his head, "It'll never go. It'll never go." Then, by cracky, black smoke pours out the stack, the whole boat shudders and the paddle wheel starts churning the water... and the boat goes Upriver. Our skeptic on the bank shakes his head, "It'll never stop. It'll never stop."

Out in St. Louis last August, a nice lady came into the SFWA press-room, wanting to do a story on us crazy people who write about flying saucers and green men. The first words out of her mouth were, "Well, now that men have landed on the moon, whatever are you all gonna write about?" (Ah, yes, they loved us in St. Louis... about as much as we

loved St. Louis.)

Harlan, it was, who gave her an answer. Politely.

"Lady, there hasn't been a moon landing story in about 15 years."

Then he told her what we were writing about.

Some of it may be no more fictional in a few years than that moon landing. In fact, what'd you want to bet... that the reason there was no trouble, technically, was because someone's been reading those moon-landing stories!

In science labs all over the world, there are answers to problems we haven't created yet. Oh, and there are answers to ones we've got... like air pollution... Lordee, we had electric cars first! to name one of the prime villains. And, more important, there is a growing keen awareness in the practical laboratories that the scientist must consider how his discoveries affect the community of man. He has a moral obligation. He can no longer immure himself in a blissful state of moral neutrality, whether it's creating new insecticides or vibrant dyes, without taking the responsibility for the products of his research.

The rockets go up, who cares where dey come down.

Dot's nod my department, says Verner von Braun.

Ah, but dear Dr. Braun, it is! Just as it's the problem of the sf writer. For example, Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* resulted in nests of water brothers forming all across the country. How much of the Hippie-Love movements had its genesis in that story?

D.G. Compton, the British sf writer, has written several novels on the moral implications of science: *Synthajoy* and, due in January, *The Steel Crocodile*. This latter novel deals with the responsibility? obligation? of the scientific community to suppress discoveries which their computer can extrapolate into a major threat against all mankind. Yet what entity can be altruistic enough to decide when the suppression is for the benefit of the world? In *Pavane*, a novel which has always been personally satisfying to me, Keith Roberts extrapolates brilliantly an alternate civilization when the "Church" arbitrarily suppressed certain scientific advances and permitted others.

Yes, the scientist is out of his academic tower, and the sf writer has had to eschew science gimmickry and cold logic, humorless, wooden characters. He has had to admit that women will figure more prominently in the future and his stories must reflect this. He must deal with problems and techniques that are on us now. And his writing must be as realistic as the scientist's moral obligations.

Therefore, the writer who is not necessarily science-oriented or science dominated... to the exclusion of other, good story mechanics... comes into his -- or her -- own.

And there is one area in which the writer who is female has a slight edge over the writer who is male. The area of portrayal... or should I say, betrayal... of emotion. No, I don't mean mawkish sentiment, or those emotions which are arbitrarily assigned to the male or female. *Sentio, ergo sum* might be the female version of the old Latin tag, *Cogito, ergo sum* which is so essentially masculine.

Some women writers prefer to divorce all of the emotion of which I am speaking from their writing, so that their work becomes as cogita-



tional as a man's. In line with my practice of making liabilities into assets, I use emotion in my writing, blatantly, purposefully, as any other permissible tool of the writing trade. And it has become expected of Anne McCaffrey that her stories will generate an emotional involvement. Why not? The people in several or seventy generations to come will be equipped with the same basic drives we have had, as a species, for a hundred thousand years.

Who shall doubt the secret hid	We are very slightly changed
Beneath Cheops pyramid	From the apes who ranged
Is that the contractor did	Inja's prehistoric clay
Cheops out of several millions?	

Thank you, Rudyard. Who also had a few choice words about the female of the species.

It has been said of science fiction that it has been immature, insecure, and it is known that the insecure person (despite overt shows of strength and indifference) is afraid of showing his true feelings. The well-adjusted personality assumes that an emotional response is logical under certain circumstances. He is unashamed of laughing, loving, hating, crying... though he does none of these things in excess. And since science fiction is showing unmistakable signs of maturing, it had damned well better hold up its head and not be ashamed to laugh, love, hate, cry.

That Moon Walk made sf respectable and former detractors are now looking keenly at this field to see what else it has to offer. You should see the letters that the Secretary Treasurer of SFWA gets from libraries, colleges, high schools, asking for help in starting sf clubs, sections, courses. I prefer to lecture to high schools myself. Today's kids know where it's at. Like, "how much money does a novel make for you, Mrs. McCaffrey" Right down to the nitty-gritty. And I tell 'em.

People who would not ordinarily read sf are picking it up. They're curious, aware that what is science fiction now is tomorrow's headline and people love to be 'in.' But today's reader wants realistic writing ... no I don't mean *Valley of the Dolls* or *Portnoy's Complaint*... though you should read Carol Carr's *Look, You Think You Got Troubles* for an extrapolation of that ethnic group... Readers, the new ones, want to be able to relate to the people in the stories. They're not scientists, trained to be clinical, logical. But sf can attract and hold them by valid portrayals of situations, problems which people now realize are not that far away... temporarily.

And the unscientist, like me, can provide that kind of science fiction writing: hard-core, medium boiled, and pure fantasy. I've tried 'em all with varying degrees of success.

I'm an optimist. Most people prefer 'happy endings' or plausible solutions: they've enough misery and hopelessness around them. And one can never find a solution if one has given up hope of finding one. I still believe in people. I write about people using science. It doesn't use them. So this unscientist can write science fiction for today's reader... maybe for tomorrow's reader to laugh, but I'll take that chance.

Personal reminiscence #82. I wrote a story in 1957, sentimentally titled "The Greatest Love." A badly written story about exogenesis which I put on the Yecch shelf in my closet. (That's the one it's hard

to reach.) Briefly, a girl walks into an obstetrician's office and announces she wants to have her twin brother's child... by his wife. She convinces the o.b. that it's only a matter of doing it since the basic techniques of exogenesis are used in breeding stock. Well, I conned my o.b. at the time into figuring out, with me, a way to adapt those techniques to human physiology. I consulted a haematologist for certain other details about blood typing. Besides being badly written, the story line was too close to happening for the sf market and way, way, far out for the ladies magazines. Last June, I opened *McCall's* and noticed a factual article by David Rorvik, M.D., entitled "Artificial Inovulation Probable in 1970." Different title. Same process. What shocked the bejassus out of me was that as an example, Dr. Rorvik cited Mrs. Y who could not carry a fetus to term. Her sister, Mrs. X, obliged.

That's awful close but I know Dr. Rorvik never saw that stupid story, and yet there were other similarities between his article and that data I'd gathered for a story a mere dozen years ago.

Maybe that's why I personally can't go in for morbid introspection and bitter satire. I can't drown, bake, fry, freeze or overgrow the poor earth we've got. Science fiction is best when it is positive. When it challenges. And it has more people to challenge, more imaginations to stimulate, more wonders to relate.

Alexander Pope says, in his *Epistle on Man*,

Eye Nature's walks, shoot folly as it flies  
And catch the manners living as they rise:  
Laugh where we must, be candid when we can,  
But vindicate the ways of God to man

As an unscientist, writing science fiction, I will paraphrase that last line...

But vindicate the ways of science to man.





SHORE-A-LIE ...

# Dirty Wordies, or, The Fiendish Thingie

## A Speech\* by Joanna Russ

Ladies and gentlemen, members of the Philadelphia Science Fiction Society, majors, minors -- in short, everybody -- thank you very much for being here and thank you for inviting me to speak. My coming to the Philcon is already a tradition (with me, anyway, if not with anybody else) and it's one that I'm very glad of. I meet really lovely people and I get to talk about science fiction (which I really can't do during the year) and when I make jokes, people actually laugh, and you don't know how nice that is. But there is one drawback. After you accept an invitation to speak, and think with great joy of someone else paying the plane fare (in this case Cornell University) and think of all the people you'll meet, and the friends, and the parties, and the drinks, and the fact that there are so many people who really like science fiction -- you can practically get maudlin about it -- there comes that one chilling thought: to speak, I must have something to speak about. And I'm afraid that today I'm going to speak about something rather serious.

I don't want to. Let me get that clear. Cornell is a very serious place. No description of mine can possibly do justice to the earnestness displayed by today's students, their concern with moral imperatives and social problems, their hatred of hypocrisy, their insistence that everything taught in a college community, in fact everything you do, be motivated not by petty and personal goals but by the great communal goals of peace, brotherhood, and the moral transformation of life. Or to put it briefly, the place is becoming absolutely unlivable. Well, I wanted to escape. Now nobody feels more than I do the wickedness of doing something merely because you like it, but I thought that for once in a way it would be all right, like a kind of vacation. So what I was planning to do was talk about horror stories. Horror stories were a very early love of mine and I never really got over them. I can still remember the look on Damon Knight's face many years ago when I told him that not only had I read *At the Mountains of Madness*, but I had actually enjoyed it.

As I say, this is what I was going to talk about. But if you're going to talk about something, you do have to say something about it, and except for burbling enthusiastically, I don't have that much to say about horror stories. Of course, I could read one to you -- say, I could read *At the Mountains of Madness* to you -- from beginning to end -- and I might enjoy it. But I don't think that would work out.

So I dropped horror stories and was looking around for another subject. Just by chance I happened to pick up a book of light verse and lo! there was a poem. I read the poem (this one, here) and knew that my subject, alas, had chosen me. It is serious and I'm sorry. Here's the poem:

*\*Presented at the Philadelphia Science Fiction Conference on Friday evening, November 14, 1969*

THE FREEDOM OF THE PRESS  
by Morris Bishop

I remember when I was a boy  
The books that I used to enjoy  
Were likely as not to employ  
    A phrase I remember as queer.  
For instance: "Then Chimmie the Rat  
Turned on his captor and spat  
A stream of profanity that  
    Is unprintable here."

Or: "The buses collided and both  
Drivers emitted an oath  
Unprintable!" or perhaps, "Quoth  
    The mule-skinner, urging his mules:  
'Giddap, you unprintable jacks!  
Or I'll land some unprintable whacks  
Upon your unprintable backs,  
    You unprintable fools!"

I think we may fairly conclude  
That blasphemous language and lewd  
Would over and over intrude  
    In the idiom spoken by men.  
And I think my examples will teach  
That as far as our memories reach  
The speakable phrases of speech  
    Were unprintable then.

But custom has changed with a rush;  
I open a book and I blush;  
I close it again, crying "Hush!"  
    No reading aloud I allow.  
I halt, when I see with dismay  
The words that I never could say.  
The printable words of today  
    Are unspeakable now.

--Reprinted, with permission, from  
*A Bowl of Bishop* by Morris Bishop  
(Dial Press, 1954)

So. Now you know why this speech is entitled "Dirty Wordies, or,  
The Fiendish Thingie."

I'm going to talk about dirty words -- that is, tabooed words --  
I'm going to defend them (with some reservations) and I am going to use  
them, although I will try not to go out of my way to do so. I do not  
want to shock anybody, though I suspect most of you are a lot less  
shockable than I am -- and if I talked about what are commonly called  
obscene words and was very careful not to use any, I would be putting  
myself in the ridiculous position of advocating a certain kind of free-  
dom and then running away from it at full speed.

One thing I'd like to make clear before going on is that I'm talk-  
ing about words -- tabooed words -- not sexuality as such or violence as  
such or pornography as such. You can write pronography without using a  
single dirty word: *Fanny Hill*, for example. When I say "obscene" I mean  
the original meaning of the word "obscene" -- *ob scena* -- off-stage --

that is, things which must not be shown. In modern use obscene words are what Morris Bishop called "unspeakable" in the poem -- words which must not be spoken or written though everybody knows what they mean (or every adult, anyway, presumably knows them). Dirty words, four-letter words, "Anglo-Saxon words" and so on. By the way, I cannot find out whether they are really Anglo-Saxon or not -- I tried looking them up in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but the OED took the chaste position that such things don't exist, so although I found all sorts of words that I didn't know existed, like "Euryale" or "clowder," I couldn't find "fuck". So the Anglo-Saxon derivation may just be folklore. If anybody knows for sure, I'd like to hear about it.

Now, there are three ways to use dirty words; one of which I think nobody could possibly attack, one of which I think nobody could possibly defend, and one which is the one really in question today. Let me get the first two out of the way. The three tend to get mixed up, with very bad results, and I don't want to be misunderstood. It's the kind of misunderstanding that leads to people shouting at each other and having very satisfying battles but this is more heat than light and I want the light, not the heat.

The first way of using tabooed words is one I don't think anybody would object to -- what you might call Information. I mean things like reportage, sociology, etymology, dictionaries of slang, and (to a degree) realism in literature. If a foreigner to this country asked me to name a four-letter word and I answered "One of our four-letter words is ---" you could not, I think, object to that and say "000 you said a dirty word." In the same way, when the use of tabooed words is necessary to the characterization of a particular character in a particular story, I don't think anybody could object in principle. You might find it distasteful in practice and say something like: well, why can't the author find a substitute? but still the principle would stand. In fact, sometimes there is no substitute. For example, I once heard two bums in a New York subway having a conversation in which every other word was Fuck or Fucking This or Fucking That or What the Fuck. The only way to convey the incredible mindlessness of that conversation, as well as its dreary malice and the kind of anesthetic effect such repetition has is to quote verbatim. Similarly, when you want somebody to be genuinely shocked in a story, you have to give him something to be genuinely shocked at, something that particular person, at that time, would be shocked at. And you can't just say "unprintable." I think it was James Jones who tried to invent a substitute for "fuck" in a novel he published after World War II, so he made up the word "frigging" (which was not actually a real word at all.) This has had the strange effect of making "frigging" -- to many people, including me -- a much worse word than the real one. But all this comes under the heading of realism, or realism in characterization. It's the character who uses the word, not the author, or it's the author speaking in the first person as a character. If this were all that modern writers did, I don't think Morris Bishop would have written that poem. Most writers are not bums and most of them don't write about people for whom characterization by use of obscenities is absolutely essential. Mind you, when authors use obscene words in this way, the words remain obscene -- they keep on being tabooed words -- and very, very seldom do they become the author's language, the argot of a whole book.

Of course, I do realize that realism, as I've been trying to des-



cribe it, does imperceptibly grade into something else, and that you can hardly ever say of a particular word in a particular story: that is absolutely necessary. What annoys people, I think, is when authors go beyond what they, the readers, consider absolutely necessary. That isn't realism but something else. This something else is the second way of using tabooed words and it seems to me to be one that nobody can defend. It's a little game we play all over this country and it's called More-liberated-than-thou.

At Cornell I meet an awful lot of this. We have weekly poetry readings there, for students, and every second week or so, some student is sure to get up, settle himself in an attitude of intense, daring hostility, and read a poem that begins like this:

Fuck you, America!

Whereupon the audience, whose brains have already been reduced to oatmeal by all the bad poetry they have had to listen to before, get a glazed look in their eyes, and you can almost see them thinking: oh, no. Not again. But of course we do get it again. And again. And again. And if you protest, you are immediately told that you're the kind that would have banned *Ulysses*. I even met an English major once -- a senior girl -- who told me in all seriousness that all literary masterpieces were shocking when they first came out. Sure -- Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dryden, Pope, Racine, Moliere. I could go on with a list as long as my arm of great writers whose works were not shocking when they were first written -- in fact, I did, I named them for her, but she wasn't impressed. Among those who fancy being avant-garde in the arts, if you can't manage when they call "social relevance," well, in a pinch you can always throw in a few tabooed words and give yourself the air of being very daring and original.

Now part of the reason I detest this kind of exhibition is that it is an exhibition -- the writer is showing off and the whole business about being so daring and bold is a fake. The writer is trying to show you how earthy and virile and bold he is -- what somebody once called the false-hair-on-the-chest school of writing. Second, people who write like this are doing it in order to shock -- and to my mind that is just as immoral as writing to please. For example, I do not write to please (I can see some of you who have read my work nodding very emphatically at this point). Or let's say, to flatter the reader, to make things easy for him, to cozy up to him with the attitude of I'm-only-doing-it-so-you'll-pay-for-it-you-know. I don't write to be obscure, either, though sometimes I find that I have to be. I don't like it when that happens. And I certainly don't write to shock you or disgust you -- that is, to hurt you -- nor do I write to show off how dashing and liberated I am. I am a very conservative writer and a very conservative person. I write to tell the truth. I may not always manage it, but I do try. And it seems to me that this attitude -- writing to tell the truth -- is the only possible honest attitude for a writer, whether he's writing profound tragedy or light comedy, whether he's writing frivolously or seriously. Somebody who does not respect his reader, somebody who hates him, somebody who says Boy, am I going to impress you; Wow, am I going to shock you; Wow, will you be sorry you picked up this book, you stupid, old, middle-class blockhead -- somebody like that is hopelessly corrupt. He has turned aside from the real business of writing to indulge his rage or his vanity and that is sheer self-indulgence, just as bad as any other kind of self-indulgence. The business of writ-

ing is not to shock people, or to preach to them, or to call them names. This may happen to some readers but it's purely accidental. There is a fashionable idea around today -- maybe I should not call it an idea, for I hardly think it attains to the complexity of real thinking -- there is this confused notion, then, that anger is somehow sacred, rage is holy, and you are justified in doing anything you please as long as you are angry enough -- and angry at the right targets, that is, at the currently fashionable targets. I do not agree. Being shocked is not in itself a good thing for people; on the contrary, it is a distinctly unpleasant experience, and the writer who shocks you on the grounds that it's good for people to be shocked is like the writer who hits you over the head with a brick on the grounds that it's good for people to be hit on the head now and then, and anyhow, he enjoys it.

By the way, people who use dirty words this way -- as missiles, hand grenades, deadly weapons -- are following a very conventional taboo themselves. They are not nearly as daring as they think. The conventional taboo I mean is that you cannot show two people making love happily and voluntarily but you can show (in whatever gory or fantastic detail you like) the process of one of them murdering the other.

But I'm getting a little off the subject. To get back: there's an even worse objection to the Fuck You school of literature -- it gives writers a way of being sensational without their actually having to write anything. It's nothing but a modern variation on the good, old Rabbit-out-of-the-Hat phenomenon: the Unearned Thrill. That is, a writer doesn't have to work, he doesn't have to create anything; all you do is pull this rabbit out of this hat and everybody says: Wow, gee, look at that, isn't that something! In the 1890's the Rabbit Out of the Hat on the English stage was ADULTERY. Some lady in an English or French play would finally, in the last act but one, put on a big display of hysteria and finally come out with the dreadful secret: Alas, he is my LOVER, and the audience would gasp: Wow, gee, isn't that something! In the 1920's Noel Coward wrote a very curious play called *Vortex*, which ends when the hero finally lets it be known that -- gasp! sob! -- I am a DOPE ADDICT, and again the audience apparently responded: Wow, gee, isn't that something! The play looks very curious nowadays because we more or less accept narcotics addiction as fact but it's no longer so -- well, so transcendental, so to speak -- and a modern reader feels the play is just not finished. In fact, the play ends where a modern play would begin. This is because the rabbit is no longer startling all by itself, and that is the trouble with these rabbits -- they go out of date. In the 1950's the Rabbit was homosexuality -- I'm thinking, say, of *Tea and Sympathy* -- and again, the very mention of the subject was supposed to be enough to give you a deep, profound, and moving emotional experience, which is idiotic. And of course if there's a rabbit wandering around the theater now it's a Racial Rabbit. Race is the subject which the author only has to mention and does not have to actually treat or describe.

The trouble with tabooed words is that they, too, are rabbits pulled out of hats -- all a writer has to do is push a very, very simple button and his readers will do all the work. The sensation is completely unearned and this offends me. There are very few ways in which a writer can really make the adrenalin race through your bloodstream. But with those Dirty Fiendish Wordies he can do it in no time flat, and without any work. And get reviewed as daring, frank, candid, with-it, young,

telling it like it is, nitty-gritty, and the rest of that whole dreary catalogue. Notice -- a writer who uses tabooed words to show off or to shock is not breaking down the taboo; he is maintaining it. After all, he depends on it. How can he be shocking unless there's a taboo? How can he be dashing modern unless there's a taboo?

As you may have guessed by now, I don't like the taboo. I want to break it down. I want to be able to use dirty wordies without shocking anybody. I want to write about the subjects they refer to without shocking anybody. And if there's nothing else, losing the taboo completely would have one great advantage: I would no longer have to listen to student poetry that begins -- well, you know how it begins.

So I want to break down the taboo. I want it to vanish. There are things the taboo keeps me from doing as a writer and that makes me mad. There is, in fact, a dead place in the English language left by these tabooed words, and when you try to write about material located in this place, you run into great difficulties. But why? somebody might say. surely there are euphemisms, replacements for these tabooed words -- why use one when you can use another? But this isn't true. There are euphemisms (lots of them) but there are no synonyms. It's not as if there were two ways of saying things: the polite way and the impolite way, and that both have the same connotations, or the same force, or the same exact meaning. This really is not true. To take an example -- and again I'm sorry, but I'll try to stick to one dirty wordie so the shock will sort of wear off -- take the word "fuck." Surely (you say) surely there are synonyms and to spare. People can be said to make love, they go to bed with each other, they sleep with each other, they mate, they 'make it' together, they have sexual intercourse, they copulate, they are in sexual congress -- that's all I can remember but there must be dozens more, and if you go back a couple of centuries, many we don't use any more. With all these words, why should I get stuck on one syllable? Pick one of the permissible ones and let the tabooed ones go, who cares? Well, I do. And I'll try to tell you why. An example: a student in one of my classes wrote a very lovely poem in which he used the tabooed word -- not an obscene poem or an exhibitionistic poem, or a poem meant to shock, not anything of the sort. It was a poem about the briefness of human life, a classic subject. He said something like: here we are at Cornell, students come and go, everybody's so busy and everything goes by so fast -- birds, dogs, people -- in the end only the buildings and the ivy remain the same. They endure while everything else is transient and vanishes. OK. One of the images he used was that of sparrows in the Cornell ivy -- like those of other old, ivy-covered buildings, our walls are covered with birds' nests -- and he wanted to compare the generations of human beings to the swiftness of the lives of these little birds: here today, gone tomorrow, and so on. So he wrote: "Generations of sparrows \_\_\_\_\_ under the eaves." (I've left a space there.) Let's take a look at all the synonyms for the forbidden fiendish thingie. "Generations of sparrows make love under the eaves." This is silly. It's obviously a euphemism and worse still, it's too poetic and too human; people "make love" but sparrows don't have the emotions to "make love" -- listen, "Make love," to create love, a very beautiful metaphor and far too good for the hack-work we make it do. So that's out. To say sparrows "sleep together" -- well, of course they sleep together, but that isn't what we mean. Again, it's a metaphor and it loses its sexual connotation entirely when you use it here. "Go to bed together?" Furniture? Chairs and tables in the ivy? Obviously not! Sparrows

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"making it" under the eaves? Much too flip, too slangy; it ruins the sad, elegiac feeling that he's trying to get. OK, sparrows "have sexual intercourse under the eaves" -- I hope you can hear, as I do, how awkward that language is, and again how it sounds wrong in tone. And as for "sexual congress," forget it -- it sounds like Chaucer's *Parlement of Foules*.

Two are left now. "Generations of sparrows copulate under the eaves" or "Generations of sparrows mate under the eaves." I think sparrows are too little to "copulate" -- I mean that for a tiny, quick, fast living, fluttery, feathery sort of creature, "copulate" is much too massive a word. Elephants copulate. Whales copulate. But sparrows? The word is bigger than the act and takes longer. And "mate" -- now there's a good word, "mate" -- one syllable which fits in with the rhythm of the line, an exact meaning -- but is it? "Mate" means to match up or pair off; an animal's "mate" is something like a human spouse, and it is most unfortunate (for the poem, I mean) that sparrows do not mate. They are promiscuous. Pigeons mate. Pigeons pair off, but sparrows do not. Maybe at this point we ought to change "sparrows" to pigeons, but again, pigeons are bigger birds than sparrows. Not only that, but they are slower, they live more slowly, they court each other for a rather long time, and their mating introduces the idea of pairing off, of fidelity, of families even, and takes away all that brief, hectic, busy-ness, which is what the student wants in his poem. What he actually wrote was, of course, "Generations of sparrows fuck under the eaves" which is very short, and sparrowy, and plain. And very good, I think.

The point I'm trying to make is that our equivalents for four-letter words are of two kinds: either they are metaphors, in which case they bring in all sorts of other ideas, or they are polysyllabic and clinical. You can say that two people slept together, for example, but this is a metaphor -- once again, a very pretty one -- it's a little picture: heads on the pillow, an arm flung out into the dark, the innocence of sleeping faces, the sound of quiet breathing, somebody turning restlessly in his sleep. And so on. You can't keep out the connotations, just as you can't keep the human connotations out of "make love." It would be an exceptional sparrow who could make love. Even "sexual intercourse" is a metaphor -- there is commercial intercourse, financial intercourse, social intercourse -- and the word "intercourse" itself dissolves into a metaphor if you look at it carefully. ("Course" = street, way, concourse. "Inter" = between. Sounds like the swapping of material that goes on inside an amoeba.) And the slangy equivalents, like "make out" are not only vague; they carry their slanginess with them. On the other hand, the exact words (like "copulation") are Latinate, polysyllabic, and to me they smell of the textbook and the hospital. They are cold words. They are unkind and antiseptic words.

There is, therefore, no way of talking about the things and experiences described by the tabooed words without being poetic, euphemistic, or clinical. There is no way of being plain. There are no neutral synonyms for these words. And that's a very great loss to a writer and (I suspect) to everybody. If I want to say that I brushed my teeth or put on my hat, or I want to refer to my left foot or my ear or the floor, I have a neutral way of saying it. "Hat" is not a loaded word. "Onomatopoeia" is not a loaded word. A word that describes an emotional state is not in itself loaded, like "horror" although the emotional state certainly is. Words that imply judgments of value, like "criminal" or

"saint" or "traitor to his class" are not loaded as words -- that is, they are not taboo. It's the referents themselves that provoke emotion, not the words alone. Also, there are equivalents, e.g. "He murdered him" or "He shot him" or "He encased his feet in concrete and threw him in the Hudson." This isn't true of dirty wordies. To put it briefly, there are areas of our lives which we cannot talk about plainly and neutrally, and I don't like that. The Latinate polysyllables can be used, but they impose a kind of clinical disinfectant on what should be much simpler and much more ordinary and human.

I feel this lack in English very much sometimes -- and I get hopelessly envious when I read a poet like Chaucer. He could say anything, all the way from the most ideally poetic to the blunt to the plain to the vulgar to the sordid. But he does not make things sordid by using forbidden words; he makes them sordid by creating them as sordid things. Sure, he does shade his language appropriately to the events, but there is no breaking of a taboo involved. I envy him very much. Virginia Woolf has said that reading Chaucer is an odd experience because he uses the whole of the English language, and that when a modern writer tries to do this, he finds that some words have gone rusty from disuse and if you touch them, like keys on a piano, you don't get the proper musical note but a kind of discordant shriek. I would like to see all the notes back on the piano. One of the most annoying things in the world is the way dirty words can distract people from anything else -- when a reader gets shocked at a dirty wordie, he stops paying attention to the plot, to the characters, to the mood, to the theme, to everything. The dirty word is a little bomb that explodes and scatters the work of art in all directions. (Hence, "Fiendish Thingie" from the Beatles' movie, *Help!*) Here I am trying to show you something tragic, or something comic, or joyful, or beautiful, and all I get is: a Thingie! a Fiendish Thingie! Ugh! Ptoo! Help! Take it away!

The whole effort of literary art is to make things speakable. Nothing should be unspeakable or unnameable. That's what language is for -- to name things. There's a Harvard Lampoon parody of *Lord of the Rings* out now, called *Bored of the Rings*, in which Saruman is called "The Nameless No-No," which is very funny and very apt. But I don't like nameless no-nos. I'm a writer. I name things. Of course the function of a taboo is not merely to indicate that there are proper and improper ways of speaking -- you can do that without a taboo -- but to make the things described by the tabooed words literally unspeakable, and through that, unthinkable. (People always do think of them, of course, but their thinking can be distorted or dulled or made very difficult.) Let me go over that again. There are all sorts of improprieties in speech, in language, that are not taboos -- a way of speaking that is proper to a child is demeaning or inappropriate to an adult, for instance. If I went on a radio program and started using baby-talk, people would be very surprised, and probably think I had lost my mind. Or the informality of slang is inappropriate to a formal speech. These are not forbidden words *per se*. In Shaw's play, *Getting Married*, there is a character who is told to address a cleric as "father" so when the poor man comes in, she says "Hello, Dad!" This is not a tabooed word. But the Victorian lady who spoke of "limbs" rather than "legs" was obeying a word-taboo. I saw a movie once called *Creation of the Humanoids* in which robots spoke of a central computer as the Father-Mother. This puzzled me, until I realized that they were calling the computer the Father-Mother to avoid calling it the Mother-Father. That's a purely verbal

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taboo.

I don't want to get into the position here of saying we ought to do away with all taboos because that would be silly. We obviously do need taboos on actions -- for example, the taboo against coming up here and beating me to death simply because you do not like my speech is a very, very good taboo. Very useful. But the taboos on what we call dirty words seem to me to have outlived their usefulness, certainly for people like ourselves who are involved in reading and writing books. And of course the whole area of sex is in the process of great change -- as Tom would say, from being taboo to being noa (that is, everyday, ordinary, commonplace, secular.) Why I don't know, of course. It's an area I write about a great deal. Again, I don't know why. Of course sex does interest everybody, for obvious reasons, but the reasons for writing about it seriously are something else again.

I think maybe for a woman it's a matter of self-definition, a matter of identity (excuse me for using that cliché, but that's the closest I can get to describing what I mean). A woman's identity -- even now -- is more a sexual identity than a man's, less a professional or vocational identity, less a political or class identity. I remember a college friend of mine saying very bitterly once, "Men have all sorts of jobs but women have only one job." That's certainly less true than it used to be, but it's still partly true for all women and absolutely true for most. Also, female sexuality has hardly begun to appear in literature, and this may be more important as a reason why women (or me, anyway) want to write about sex. We know now (and if we don't, we never will) how men see women. Men have painted women, men have described women, men have written poems about women, and poems to women, for centuries. For example, the world is full of men's descriptions of beautiful women. But where are women's descriptions of themselves, of what it is to be a woman, or what it is to be the mother of a son, of a daughter, to be pretty, to be plain, to be old, to be desired, to desire someone else? Men's opinions about women would fill this whole hotel, if you wrote them out, but women's opinions of men hardly exist. And women's opinions of themselves hardly exist. And that's one reason I write about sex.

By the way, men and women have very different attitudes toward dirty words. The false-hair-on-the-chest school is (as you would expect) exclusively male. After all, profanity or obscenity was always supposed to be virile. Women didn't use such language at all -- if they were respectable -- and if they heard it, they weren't supposed to know what it meant. Or if they did, they were supposed to be embarrassed. So women have never been able to show off with bad language in the same way men have. Whether this will change, I don't know. But I've noticed something very interesting with the students at Cornell: of the ones who make a point of using dirty words, it is always the men who use them to shock, or to hurt. I don't mean all the men do this, but students who write angry poems about Fuck You, America, are always men. These are people for whom the taboo still holds. The women don't do that. Either they don't use this language at all, or they use it very matter-of-factly or bluntly -- noa again, secular. Why I don't know. I think there's a certain amount of contempt involved, maybe revenge for the double standard, something like: hm! so this is the dangerous, secret, tabooed magic I'm not supposed to know about. Well, buster, it ain't much. Maybe for a woman to use the tabooed language at all takes the magic out of it because it depends on being an exclusively male language. I've no-



ticed, again at Cornell, that nothing can embarrass an audience of older men quite so much as a woman who talks dispassionately and coldly about sex. This also seems to go against the double standard in such matters. If she's cute, if she's coy, if she's charming, it's all right; but if she's plain and explicit, if she's in earnest, if she doesn't seem to care what the audience thinks of her, a lot of men get very uncomfortable. And if she uses dirty wordies in this way, they get even more uncomfortable.

So, back to taboo and noa. Somebody said here last year that if you make a tabooed area of life noa, then the taboo will just pop up again somewhere else -- that is, something is always taboo, but what it is varies. But there is always some part of life that becomes unspeakable, unthinkable, shocking and so on. Mind you, I don't want to talk just about forbidden actions -- taboo doesn't just mean forbidden, that you mustn't do it. There are plenty of things we know we aren't supposed to do which we talk about zestfully all the same -- things like driving a car on the wrong side of the road or not giving up smoking or so on -- these are rules without much profound emotion attached to them. And there are things, also, that have profound emotions attached to them but are not unspeakable and unthinkable -- like murder.

Taboo means more than just: you mustn't. A tabooed thing is horrible in a special way; it's appalling, it's shocking, it seems to shake you up to your roots. There's this peculiar sense of horror at the idea of even thinking of breaking the taboo.

What is a taboo, really? Is it a magical way of controlling actions? Certainly the taboo on talking plainly about something makes it difficult to think plainly about it, and hence very difficult to do it. Or is it the other way around? Do people need there to be a tabooed area? Does the feeling come first and do people arbitrarily choose some area in their lives to match the feeling?

Suppose sex stops being a tabooed area -- what will replace it? Will anything replace it? These are grand questions for science fiction writers. Last year at the Philcon we had two panels: one on sex and one on aggression. Now you'd think that sex -- being a tabooed area -- would stir up embarrassment, unpleasantness, anxiety, and so on, but that didn't happen. We finished the panel on sex in a glow of fellowship, delighted that we were all so lusty and earthy and so on. It was really very jolly. But the panel on aggression -- ay-ay-ay! People were ready to punch each others' heads.

Is aggression going to be the next tabooed area, and will we come up with such a strong prohibition against it that even the very words that describe it will be outlawed? Will "kill" become a dirty word? Some people even now are trying to insist that it is. If "kill" does become a dirty word, I will have to make a speech defending my right to use it, the same speech (in fact) because the arguments against a verbal taboo are always the same.

This whole area, it seems to me, is one in which science fiction can do much more than it has. What will be shocking in the future? What will take on magical horribleness? Theodore Sturgeon has done some things like this -- usually, I think, with taboos that resemble our sex-and-excretion taboos, but most of the other examples in the field are somewhat mechanical.

There's one exception. In 1984 George Orwell showed brilliantly the process by which whole areas of thought and experience become taboo. The rulers of that awful world even explained how they were going to do it -- make something unspeakable, and eventually you will make it unthinkable. Do you remember Badthink? Most traditional political thought would simply disappear. Ninety-five percent of what I've said tonight would just be Badthink -- there would not be even the words to describe it. This is a beautiful example.

How about a world in which "neurotic" is a dirty word? (It's getting there.) Or "alone?"

There's a marvelous passage in a historical novel set in 4th century Britain; I don't remember the author, but he has done a whole series of historical novels. He's English. Alfred ---? A whole gang of characters are saying what they would do to a captured prisoner if they had the chance; you know, flay him alive, disembowel him, and so on. Then one, with an air of great bravado, says: know what I would do? I would stick out my tongue at him! And everybody turns pale, because this -- this is something so horrible that nobody even remembers what it means any more.

We do have a model for what happens when an area of taboo becomes noa. Blasphemy, I mean the taboo against blasphemy, is practically a dead letter today. If I were to say: "Christ, I've got a pebble in my shoe," very few people would turn pale or gasp or get furiously angry. Let alone blasphemies that have simply gone out of the language, like "Zwounds!" -- God's wounds. Of course you can still insult people's religion and get them angry, but the sense of horror that used to cling to exclamations like "Jesus Christ!" or "Damn!" (such a common word now) is pretty much gone -- that is, of course, for English-speaking people like ourselves. An educated Catholic who reacted to blasphemy with the same intensity an educated Catholic would have reacted to it in the twelfth century would have a very hard time of it today. I have been told, by the way, that the English exclamation "bloody" is still a good bit stronger for them than it is for us -- but they, in turn, don't honor our taboo about the word "shit" -- as you may notice if you work in an office where there are English secretaries. Apparently "bloody" is derived from "God's blood" and used to be a really horrible blasphemy, one of the worst there was, and some of the old feeling still clings to it.

One of the great advantages in the disappearance of obscenity might be -- and I would like to see this happen -- a revival of the grand and beautiful art of cursing -- NOT blasphemy, NOT unimaginative, repetitive boring obscenity but real cursing -- the invoking of misfortune in the most vivid and colorful way possible. William Tenn has a lovely story about Jewish cursing. This takes real skill. One of my favorites is: may you inherit a hotel in Miami with a hundred rooms and may you have a heart attack in every single room! Or: may your nose drop off and your feet turn green and may your wife make you *cocu* with fishmongers! There is an extremely funny movie, a parody of arty Italian films, which is called 2 and in which a man and woman try to outdo each other in describing how vile each of them is. The dialogue ends something like this: SHE: I am the lowest worm that crawls the earth. HE: I am the lint in the bellybutton of that worm.

Invective, as an art form, is a very beautiful thing, and so is cursing and both of them take real imagination. As to obscenity --

*Continued on Page 29*

# A Speech' by

## Jack Williamson

I'm very proud and happy to be here, and I want to say that I think this convention is a fine thing. It certainly shows that science fiction is being taken a lot more seriously, by a lot more people, than it was back about 1927 when I discovered it.

At that time there was only one science fiction magazine, the old *Amazing Stories* that had just been launched by Hugo Gernsback. The stories were mostly reprints of classics by such writers as A. Merritt, Jules Verne, H.G. Wells, Edgar Rice Burroughs. The few new stories were being written mostly by amateurs, since half a cent a word didn't attract very many writers from the *Saturday Evening Post*. But the covers were magnificent. They were drawn by Frank R. Paul. Some of them look a little bit crude when you look back at them today, but at the time they were the most wonderful things I'd ever seen.

And stumbling on that magazine was one of the most thrilling things that ever happened to me. I pretty soon discovered that here was what I wanted to do. *Amazing Stories* was soon joined by another magazine, the old *Amazing Stories Quarterly*, which was about the size of a telephone book, and sold for 50¢ at a time when 50¢ wasn't so easy to come by.

My first contribution was an editorial; it was entered in a prize contest and printed in the old *Amazing Stories Quarterly*. It was called "Scientifiction: Searchlight of Science," the idea being that science fiction was lighting the way for the progress of actual science. It was written, of course, in the first fine glow of enthusiasm, and probably I claimed too much. I don't want to be accused of taking science fiction too seriously because after all we do read it for fun. And I'm sure that there's a good deal of fun as well as a certain amount of inevitable hard work in the writing of the better science fiction.

Today, after a quarter of a century -- it has been sprinkled pretty well with assorted disillusionments -- I still think there is some truth in that piece. I think that most of us are here at this convention because we feel that science fiction is in some way different from other types of escape literature. One element in the lure that it has for most of us, I think, is the feeling that it represents a kind of imaginative exploration along the frontiers of scientific knowledge.

Of course, science fiction is a great deal more than that. There are such matters as characterization. And some of it doesn't even pretend to be prediction of any sort. But I'm interested in this idea of the exploration and of the possible future by extrapolation. That frontier of course is changing, and has changed a good deal since I began writing. At that time it was still possible to set stories in the blank

*\*Presented as part of the after-banquet entertainment at the SFCon, the 12th World Science Fiction Convention, on Saturday evening, September 4, 1954, in San Francisco, California.*

places on the map. Today those blank places are pretty well filled up with broken Coke bottles and rusty beer cans.

Twenty-five years ago television, radar, long-range rockets, and even atomic bombs were still science fiction gadgets. These frontiers of knowledge have been spreading out, and are still spreading at what is known as an exponential rate. The stone axe was a pretty useful new technological development for several thousand years. Gunpowder held out for 700. And today, so soon after Hiroshima, the A-bomb is already obsolete. The science fiction writer has to scratch to keep ahead of the headlines.

But yet, hard pressed as he may sometimes be for new ideas, we can find consolation in the fact that larger areas tend to have longer frontiers. The more that is known, the more unknown there is beyond to come within reach of the searching imagination. There are so many new frontiers coming along that it's hard to keep up with all of them. One example that I might mention is the new developments in linguistics and what is known as metalinguistics. That's a new frontier to me too. It seems there are differences of opinion between the people in linguistics and metalinguistics. I don't want to get involved in that. But what interests me is the idea that what people think, or can think, is pretty well determined by the structure of the language in which they do their thinking. The idea of relativity, for instance, is said to be pretty well built into the Hopi Indian language, but it's so foreign to the structure of our European languages that a special artificial language of mathematics had to be invented before such a man as Einstein could work it out.

I have to admit that it's hard for me to keep up with the science fiction that's being published. It's possible I missed a story or two. I don't believe that the possibilities inherent in linguistics and metalinguistics have been very well exploited so far in science fiction stories. It seems to me that there's probably a possible connection there between these possibilities and the very interesting series of articles that Dr. Gotthard Guenther has just had in *Astounding\*\**, in which he was talking about a new sort of mathematics as a new approach to cosmology, that might abolish distance and bring the stars as close as we wish. On the fantasy level, it seems to me that possibly Horace Gold might be interested in a story in which a linguist rediscovers an ancient language that makes magical incantations really work.

And I'd like to go one step further with this idea of science fiction and the frontiers. I think it's likely that modern science fiction, as well as the Kentucky rifle, is indebted to the frontier for the shape it has taken today. The historian, Walter Prescott Webb, has written a book called *The Great Frontier*, in which he tries to interpret modern history in terms of the effect that the physical frontiers of America and the other new lands have had on civilization during the past 500 years or so.

It seems that there are differences of opinion among professional historians, as well as between the people in linguistics and metalinguistics. I've been surprised to meet a couple of professional historians who were a little dubious about Webb. But it seemed to me that what makes them dubious is that they feel it tends to belittle the accomplishments of the pioneer with his talk of unearned windfalls of wealth.

\*\* July - August 1954

In spite of that I think that his ideas are well worth looking into. He thinks that the frontiers of the new world tended to weaken the social institutions of the old world. They enabled men to escape from the feudal lords and the old dominion of the church.

Among the treasures that were found on the frontier besides the gold of Peru and the oil under Texas, according to Webb, were such things as the Protestant religion, democracy, and capitalism. I think science fiction can be added to that list. The man on the frontier, as he said, was able to shed a great many cramping institutions and traditions that failed to serve him usefully in his struggle to survive. He found freedom, whether he was looking for it or not, and I think he soon learned to like it. Freedom to act, and to believe, and to think, is no doubt the most priceless thing that has come into the world in recent centuries. It's certainly an essential ingredient in producing science fiction.

But according to Webb these institutions that were created by the frontier are in danger now, because the frontier is closing. The new lands are occupied. The free world has been claimed. The population is rising again, the world is getting crowded. There's a good deal of talk of new frontiers -- this talk itself is a minor example. Webb discusses those new frontiers pretty pessimistically.

Though science, of course, is already moving to unlock reserves of new wealth in the oceans, in the atom, conceivably even on other planets, these so-called new frontiers don't offer much of an opportunity to the single-handed individual. It takes a group, a corporation, an alphabetical government agency, to break through. The freedom the individual discovered in America, which he could whittle out for himself with only his axe, seems to be just about used up.

Most of the crises, it seems to me, that we read about in the headlines can be traced in one way or another to this closing in of the world on us. The pressures that are molding our society today are no longer coming from the conflicts of men to tame and explore the passive nature; they're conflicts of men who are jostling one another for breathing space in a more and more crowded world. Freedom, it seems to me, is too often the price that men have to pay for survival as these pressures force them into trade unions, chambers of commerce, partisan bands, national armies, to make war in one way or another against other men.

Which doesn't leave the future outlook entirely bright. But neither is it entirely dark. Scientific progress I don't think is a reversible process. I can't think of any conceivable catastrophe that would simply turn back the clock. The world isn't ever going to be what it used to be. Whatever happens, the human race is going through a pretty tremendous adventure. We're moving faster and faster towards some new world. And with science fiction exploring the way ahead, scouting out the possibilities before they take place, at least I think we have the prospect of some interesting reading.

Thank you.



## A Speech\* by

# Donald A. Wollheim

It's hard for me to believe, even up here, that I started being a science fiction fan over thirty-five years ago. That, I suspect, is a lot longer than many of the people in this audience have been alive on Earth. It gives me a perspective that startles even me. Because I do not feel that all that time has passed. And though science fiction has become a lifetime career for me, I still get the same kind of kick out of the visions of these stories as I did back when I was still in my teens.

There are two views in the world of fandom about this sort of thing. One says that fandom is just a god-damned hobby. The other says it is a way of life. Well, I know that for different people, one or another attitude is right. For me, there can't be any question that it's been a way of life.

And for me a good one.

By becoming an active science fiction fan in my teens, I first developed my ability to express myself on paper, to handle correspondence on controversial subjects, and to feel at ease in print. Believe me, that's invaluable to anyone who is due to end up in publishing.

I met my basic circle of friends. I learned to differentiate character and to contest egos -- as well as the fine fannish art of acquiring that mysterious substance known as egoboo. I developed into more muscular form my world views and my social attitudes -- through fan activities. Through science fiction fandom, I met the girl who became my wife, and through the same channels I found my life's profession and mastered it. Though I have risen very comfortably into the world of general publishing, it is still science fiction which is the keystone of my career.

I have even raised a daughter who shows all the signs of being an active fan -- and if that doesn't prove that fandom is not only a way of life, but an inheritable one, I don't know what does.

Back in those days, back in the dismal thirties, science fiction was a dream that sustained us through some very gloomy perspectives. It was usually restricted to three poorly circulated pulp magazines with lurid titles and lurid covers -- and nobody took it seriously save the handful of fans. But we believed in it because those stories spoke of wonders to come which we desperately longed to see. The elders about us scoffed at these Buck Rogers visions. But we believed in them -- a tiny stubborn minority.

Now, here in 1968, look back and see what it was we believed in. We believed in space flight. We believed in television. We believed in robots and mechanical brains. We believed in communicators which could be carried around in your pocket and we believed in universal aviation in common use. We believed in messages from the stars and in the exploration of the sea bottoms. We believed in some world-wide system of gov-

*\*Guest of Honor speech presented at the Eleventh Annual Lunacon on Sunday afternoon, April 21, 1968, in New York City.*



ernment... and we believed in atomic power.

Above all, we believed in the universality of life -- that other planets were inhabited. Even to believe in other planets outside this solar system was daring then -- most astronomers denied them. We even believed in heat rays and death rays and suspended animation.

Sounds banal, doesn't it? Boring, everyday stuff, wasn't it? Especially if you were born in the forties. That's just the world of today and what of it? Nothing to get excited about. Certainly no grounds to read science fiction.

The fact is that this world of today is really and truly a world created by science fiction. The ideas that were dreamed up then are the living substance of life today. In short, what I see from my perspective, is that I am living in a science fiction story. This is it -- this is a science fiction world.

It still thrills me. But it doesn't mean much to the fans of today. I can still get a kick out of the story that was on the front page of the *New York Times* a month ago about the pulsating star-points that had just been discovered. In cold print, a perfectly sane astronomer advanced the suggestion that perhaps these radio pulsars were interstellar beacons of an advanced star-navigating confederation.

Pure Edmond Hamilton! And nobody blinked an eyelash about that theory. It didn't rate any blue-pencil on the part of some skeptical editor. It didn't even rate an excited editorial or a scarehead in some tabloid. Everybody who read the paper had already been indoctrinated in the pure science fiction concepts involved. Of course, there could be advanced star civilizations -- and, of course, they could be setting up beacons for their star ship routes. Just common sense. Take it for granted. Newspaper story. Don't call it science fiction. Not worth a minute's conversation.

As I said, I got a kick out of it. It bore out once again just how thoroughly our world has become a science fiction one. People born and raised in it take all this news for granted, greet each new invention with matter-of-fact indifference. Atomic submarines, laser beams, Mo-hole projects... poof! What's new in the sports page today?

The fact is that this has seeped into the imaginative stratum of society. Science fiction reading is a big thing. It sells hundreds of thousands of books every month -- not like the piddling sales of three decades ago. It's standard fare for television and in the movies.

Something therefore is still making people read science fiction. And that is strange. Where the basic ideas of new inventions are concerned, there are not many that haven't either been realized or have had a foot stuck in the door. Time travel we don't have -- but that seemed always a gimmick rather than anything we seriously expected to materialize. It was a gimmick useful for future projections and for exploring the past -- but I don't think anyone ever expected it. Transportation of material objects by radio -- that hasn't come about yet -- but when it does there won't be any surprises in it that haven't been anticipated in long-published stories.

We haven't met any interplanetary civilizations yet -- not really -- though there are already tens of thousands -- maybe hundreds of thousands -- who believe we have through the medium of the so-called  
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"flying saucers." Wish fulfillment, perhaps, but surely, even if delusion, a product of this science fiction environment we breathe in every minute of the day.

So what's keeping young people reading science fiction? What's the compelling attraction?

It's obviously not the thrill of new inventions. It's not the first space flight. That's as obsolete as *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*.

I know what it is for me.

It's the grand adventure. It's the lure of other worlds. It's the wondrous vision of days to come and the land on the other side of the mountain. It's escape reading, sure, but escape into something one would love to be involved in. It's the road away from the humdrum world of cold reality. It's the inborn human desire for the victory of good over evil. The glorious trek on the golden road to Samarkand. The crusade for right against wrong. It's an innate belief in the rightness and goodness of mankind. A belief that all too often must be sustained through fantasy as a barrier against the ugly cynicism, shoving and pushing, and crass commercialism of daily life.

Science fiction fans, and I here include all habitual readers, perhaps several million of them, are still idealists down deep. That's where the compulsive attraction lies. Science fiction is the last bulwark of idealist literature, of the wondrous vision.

That's the only way you can account for the phenomenal popularity of Middle Earth and Frodo's marvelous quest. It's not science, not invention, but it is the pure depiction of pure good against pure evil. It tells of a sacred crusade to right a wrong -- and of victory in that crusade. The success of the Tolkien trilogy was no accident.

Nor is the continuous success of the novels of Edgar Rice Burroughs and Andre Norton -- to mention but two among many -- any accident. Both writers, in their own ways, carry the same ingredients. Good will triumph, the wondrous vision will be justified.

This is the key to the reading of science fiction today. This is what really sustains science fiction in this epoch. Not smart-aleck "New Wave" writings -- all stylistic claptrap and downbeat. Not writers whose desperate ambition is to be mistaken for mainstream writers and abandon all this childish stuff about idealism to wallow in cynical satire and hold up distorting mirrors of the world about us.

We all know this world is a frightening place. That's why we read escape literature. So what do these writers think they are doing?

Fortunately, though they are noisy and self-advertising, their numbers are restricted to a little clique. Their novels get published -- fans are tolerant and will take an occasional ugly vision in their stride. But it's time to suggest that these embittered distortionists stop trying to persuade everyone else that their sick fiction is the right science fiction. If they ever succeeded in persuading the majority of writers to turn out only their ugly satires, their thorny futures of sadistic societies and Freudian anti-heroes, you would see how rapidly the sale of sf would dwindle. There is no nourishment in such visions. Science fiction cannot survive incarceration in a Coney Island house of mirrors.

A couple of months ago Terry Carr asked me to read the first installments of a novel entitled *Bug Jack Barron*. I read them and the outline of the rest of the novel and sent Terry a memo, as follows:

"There isn't a nice thing I can say about this depraved, cynical, utterly repulsive and thoroughly degenerate and decadent parody of what was once a real science fiction theme...except that it is a shoo-in to be the 'in' thing with the so-called science fiction literati and may very well stand a good chance of being the 'in' thing with the college crowd and the would-be young intelligentsia. If that happens we may make a lot of money with this packet and you may even be right about it as a candidate for a Hugo or a Nebula..."

As you see, I did not block the possibility of our publishing this work. Ace Books has a large enough output to enable it to publish all varieties of science fiction -- and to do well, too, on a work as highly publicized and notorious as this one is going to be. It's just good business -- even if it is abominable science fiction.

Well, just for the record, we are not going to publish this nauseous epic for the thing was sold to another paperback publisher on terms no different than ours -- save one -- the other publisher offered to do the abomination without any editorial changes, suggestions, or alterations, not even for the betterment of the plot. This we could not in all ethical decency agree to. So you may see this work in all its revolting splendor from someone else's imprint. It may even win a Hugo -- who knows? -- but it's garbage just the same. It is worse than that -- it is the sort of thing that is a true counter-current to science fiction. It is anti-idealism; it is in opposition to the Wondrous Vision that alone sustains this whole field of literature.

Another good example of this counter-current is the much touted anthology called *Dangerous Visions*. A remarkable book, have no doubt, and I am not knocking it when I say that I regard it as a superlative horror anthology, but not as a science fiction collection.

We don't read science fiction for dangerous visions -- we read it because we are irresistibly attracted to wondrous visions.

There were a few such among the contents -- but too few. By and large the so-called dangerous visions consisted of attempts to shock sensibilities rather than to charge the imagination. What the anthologist proclaimed as the best thing in the book turned out to be thirty thousand words of Freudian nonsense. The sun-glass bedecked, weirdly accoutered editor of the book himself presented a future world story thoroughly unappetizing -- a reflection no doubt of the notorious sewers of Hollywood he unfortunately has to dwell in.

As a horror collection, it was quite impressive. Terrific, in fact. The clique contrived to vote honors to a lot of the stuff in it -- though it is to be noted that the prize-winning short story, taken from that book, was a winner perhaps because it was an exception... a piece of poetic imagery and a refusal to surrender idealism even amid so bitter a collection.

If there is any danger to science fiction today it is that the influence of embittered writers will be allowed to dominate. People do not read science fiction because they want to be told how lousy the world is or how rotten people are. That's exactly what they want to get

away from. And because these particular writers -- and I include much of what is not humorously called the Milford Mafia -- themselves have become sour on the wondrous vision doesn't mean the rest of us are. If they want to write sick mainstream literature, let them. Only don't clothe it in the garments of fantasy.

It was remarked to me by a writer whose first contact with this group was through attending the recent awards banquet of the Science Fiction Writers of America that he never felt so many cross-currents of hatred, feuding, and back-biting in any similar group. And that is a most true observation.

I belong to several professional writers' associations, such as the Western, Mystery, and the Aviation writers, as well as the SFWA. In the journals of meetings of these other organizations you do not encounter the curious continuous undertone of bitterness, vituperation and sheer nastiness that continuously peeps out of the pages and records of the SFWA.

I say that's a bad sign. These writers are mainly the purveyors of the wondrous vision. It is only a handful among them that scoff at that, that pander to the dangerous visions of disillusionment.

Fortunately the readers know what they want. And the success of such a fan as myself in picking for publication what pleases me -- the wondrous visions that can still attract and delight me -- is evidence that all such counter-currents, however loudly publicized and momentarily successful, are just minor eddies that do not and cannot reverse the inner drive that keeps science fiction as the natural reading of our age, founded on science fiction and living it in every aspect.

This is a science fiction world and the wondrous vision still leads us all on. I am happy to have played and to be playing my small part in that. Thank you.

~~~~~  
**DIRTY WORDIES** *Continued from Page 21*

sometimes I do find it upsetting, when the intent behind it is hostile, not because of the hostility per se (I think) but because of a certain single-minded dreariness. Or perhaps impotence. Dirty words are usually the weapons of those who have no other weapons. I have the same reaction to certain kinds of political invective. You might as well just snarl, because that's all it is. Verbally it's nothing. I hope some day we get to the point where obscenity simply does not 'register' any more, where it does not sound obscene.

There's a lovely example of this. You all know the cartoon character I'm going to talk about so I won't tell you who he is, but some time last year another character got mad at him and called him a series of awful names. Here is the character himself, looking very innocent and puzzled, and there is an angry person, shouting insults: You HOUND! You CUR! You BEAST! And the cartoon character just doesn't get it. He doesn't know he's being insulted. He might just as well have been called a son of a bitch; that would have struck him exactly the same way. This, to me, is a lovely situation. Hound, Cur, Beast, Dog, even Son of a Bitch -- perfectly accurate words but absolutely harmless.

Because the cartoon strip was *Peanuts* and the character, of course, was Snoopy.

Thank you.



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